Topic: -

"A Study of the Depiction of the Subalterns in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy"

Introduction: -

Indian literature in English embodies the works written in English by Indian writers. It also includes the works translated into the colonial language – English, originally written by Indian authors in their native languages. These works differ in their approach, perspective, purpose, and narration. The web of Indian literature weaves numerous ages and themes into its tapestry. The plethora of Indian literature can be traced back to 1000 century B.C., but Indian Literature in English can be dated back to the early nineteenth century. This era saw a rise in writers, both male and female. Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Shashi Deshpande, Ismat Chugtai, Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh, Agha Shahid Ali, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth, and Amitav Ghosh are a few of the prominent Indian authors writing in English. One of the major contributions of these writers has been their endeavour to re – write history, about the colonial era of India, as an attempt to enlighten the world about the suppressed. For up till now the world had been presented with a part of the story which more often than not projected the West's understanding of the East; the colonizer's perspective of the colonized.

Amitav Ghosh has established himself as one of the finest writers of his generation of Indian writing in English. Ghosh has amalgamated history and knowledge in the narration of his texts. He explores the connections between past and present, events and memories, people, cultures and countries that have a shared history. Ghosh focuses on the subaltern, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the subjugated people and the forgotten events of history and brings them from periphery to the centre. Apart from his well known fictional works such as *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In An Antique Land*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide* and Ibis Trilogy; Ghosh has also won critical acclaim

across the world for his non fictional works such as *The Imam and The Indian* and "Of Fanás and Forecastles" are a few of his works. His unique style of narration and language is what established this writer and journalist as one of the finest writer of his generation.

This research attempts to analyse *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015) which make up the Ibis trilogy, set in the nineteenth century India when the nation was being encroached by the imperial powers. The plot is set on the eve of Opium War, which consisted of a series of armed military engagements between the armies of Great Britain and China in the first half of the nineteenth century; the first war lasted from 1839 – 1842, the second war was fought in 1856 – 1860. The trilogy revolves around the First Opium War.

It is important to study the past in order to understand the present. The focal point of this research is to analyse the marginalized sections in the Ibis trilogy by Amitav Ghosh. Although, history has been revived and re–visited many times by the perspectives of various writers, historic events and the crowning incidents of the past – one of them being the British Empire's rule over foreign lands, have been researched often. The focal points of these works range between the political, social, environmental, economical, psychological, historic and scientific concerns (i.e. they differ in their approach). But Ghosh uses comprehensive perspective in his works which incorporates creative imagination, as though, they were never orchestrated and doctored for the purpose of creative writing. He brings to the fore the pain and pathos of the ordinary and the subaltern people rather than paying heed to the historic background his novels are set up against. He brings his characters from the margins to the fore, by focusing on the effects of the upheaval caused by these historic events on the persona of the characters painted by his creative brush in his oeuvre.

Characters like Deeti, Zachary Reid, Neel Rattan Haldar, Paulette Lambert, Kalua, Freddie, Bahram, Shireen and Kesri Singh portray the dilemma of the turbulent times of

history. The interaction between various nations, cultures, people and languages creates a mixed society which is a fertile landscape to study hybridity. This hybridity is ubiquitous in the trilogy. These characters despite their differences of nation of origin, culture, ethnicity, gender, and backgrounds had all bonded on one common ground of the subaltern and subjugated treatment served to them not only at the hands of British but the fellow Indians as well.

Definition of Terms: -

Postcolonialism: 'Postcolonialism' is an interdisciplinary academic field devoted to the study of European colonialism and its impact on the society, culture, history and politics of the formerly colonized regions such as the African continent, the Caribbean, the Middle East, South – Asia, and the Pacific.

Opium War: Opium Wars were fought in the mid-19th century between the forces of Western countries and of the Qing dynasty, then rulers of China. The first Opium War (1839–42) was fought between China and Britain, and the second Opium War (1856–60), also known as the *Arrow* War or the Anglo-French War in China, was fought by Britain and France against China.

Subaltern: The word 'subaltern' denotes a person holding a subordinate or inferior position. The term has been used in postcolonial studies as it also describes the hegemony of the ruling classes over the subordinate classes, such as workers and the peasants.

Lascar: 'Lascar' in the opinion of some well known 19th century lexicographers means an East Indian Sailor. But the term was also applied to all indigenous sailors of the Indian Ocean region – 'native' would have been the operative term – it referred indifferently to Arabs, South Asians, Malays, East Africans, Filipinos and Chinese.

Review of Literature: -

Amitav Ghosh in his article "Of Fanas and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail" discusses the diversity found in the ship crew also known as "lascars." Ghosh focuses on the 'Lascari' language lost with time, the language of command on the ship which was an amalgamation of English, Malay, Hindustani, Chinese, Malayalam and a few other languages spoken on board. The importance of lascars as the forerunners and predecessors of not only the migrants, to participate in the industrial processes of work, to adapt to clock – bound rhythms of work – time, to be familiar with the emerging new technologies witnessed in the world today.

Vivekanand Jha in *The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Commentary* sheds light on many of Ghosh's novels such as *The Circle of Reason, The Shadow Lines, The Calcutta Chromosome, In An Antique Land, The Glass Palace, Sea of Poppies, and River of Smoke,* where numerous issues are highlighted in the scholarship of its contributors. Sense of space and time, feminine consciousness, dominant imageries and other figure of speech in *River of Smoke*, the skilful narration of opium trade, marginality, forgotten and neglected history and the role played by opium in India with reference to socio –environmental perspective in *Sea of Poppies*, are some of the aspects found in Ghosh's oeuvre.

Amitav Ghosh (2011) by Anshuman A Mondal focuses on the significance of Amitav Ghosh as a writer who earned critical acclaim in many nations throughout the world, the notable milestones which changed his profile as the most prominent writer in the post – Rushdie generation of Indian writers in English. Moreover, he has developed a substantial body of work that resonates with some of the central concerns of what was then also an emergent field of criticism: postcolonialism. We find some prominent metaphors and symbols in his domain of oeuvre such as the figure of 'refugee', other less forcibly displaced persons – economic migrants, travellers, students, researchers on field trips- populate his

fictional and non – fictional work and constitute his central characters. He has remarked that 'travelling' is always in some way connected with his works; also, that others have noted that Ghosh visualises 'movement' as in some way fundamental to human experience, not necessarily seeing it as involving a physical journey but also as a potentiality that inhabits the consciousness of even those people often regarded as settled, such as peasants.

S Latha and K.V. Ramana in "Re – viewing Colonial Agenda in Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies*" delineates on how literary texts are increasingly read as constructs of specific historical conditions and circumstances. After the empire, a need was felt as part of decolonization process, to cancel the colonial stereotypes. It reflects not only the political history but also an understanding of culture, religion, diversity and trade as does Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*. The *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh is a retelling of the modern present through the eyes of the past. Ghosh emphasizes the enormous importance of history by situating every work in a distinct time and place, dealing with issues confronted by a man dealing with issues confronted by a man in India, situated in the global context.

Rajnish Mishra's "Opium, History and Narration in *River of Smoke*" in *Novels of Amitav Ghosh: Indian English Novels 2* (2016) discusses *River of Smoke* as an example of fiction that highlights how history of opium trade has been skilfully narrated in the novel by carefully interweaving it with the lives of the characters in the novel. It explores the various thematic strands of postcolonial responses to the shared past of the peoples of imperial colonies like India, and those under the shadows of the Empire, like China.

In *Admirable Superseding of Amitav Ghosh: A Study of Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke* Muzammil emphasizes Ghosh's expertise and innovations display a remarkable sincerity in his writings. He mentions how the titles of Ghosh's works are suggestive of the concern raised in the novel. The author maps the significance of titles of works by Ghosh. He

also discusses the bigotry system of caste as a social evil and commutation of slavery in reference to both *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke.*

Julia Lovell in *The Opium War* focuses on the first conflict of October 1839 when Britain entered the First Opium War with China and the brutality that entailed. For more than a century a strange tale of misunderstanding and compromise has become the founding episode of modern Chinese nationalism. It explores how china's national myths mould its interactions with the outside world, how public memory is spun to serve the present and how delusion and prejudice have bedevilled its relationship with the modern West.

Relevance of the Study: -

History provides knowledge of the past to understand the present and paves way for future. This philosophy forms the basis of most of Ghosh's works and the Ibis trilogy in particular. As this trilogy sheds some light on the neglected Opium Wars, it also gives us an idea of the reasons responsible for the present relations shared between the nations associated with these wars.

As the national boundaries are receding, a globalized form of the world comes to the fore. The Subaltern theory is of vital importance in the present times, as it is perceptible in our surroundings. Cases of multitude being subjugated in the name of race, caste, gender and nationality are apparent in prevailing times. This oppression is not a new and alien concept that cannot be comprehended; rather it has been prevalent for years. It is evident and reflected in many aspects of the world today. The way different sections of society are depicted is an answer to the problems of intolerance (as is evident in many nations of the world). It also encourages the varied divisions to come together and this culmination, too, results in hybridization, as the marginalized in the trilogy too come together and create a world free of demarcations. These enmeshed hybrids form of the society casts an effect on the linguistics

as well, and the trilogy is replete with the resulting 'lascari' language which is an amalgamation of English, Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Bengali, and Chinese.

Research Problem: -

The role of Opium has been vital since times immemorial as a result it has been a part of various cultures in the form of medicine, food and as a recreational drug. India, too has been, one of the many nations affected by it. Opium's existence in the Indian society can be traced in the pre – British era. Opium has also played a crucial role in Imperialism. For it was the Portuguese, who first observed Indian opium use in early seventeenth century, and stated that opium was widely used and highly valued in the society. Opium's role was just as important when the British East India Company established itself in India; the Company gained control of opium yields and established a state monopoly. As the Company not only forced its production on the Indian farmers but through Opium trade to China it was also trying to avenge and earn the drain of wealth caused by the tea imported from China to England which evaluated in a drain of one tenth of the revenue collected in name of the Crown.

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy consisting of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015), too, is based on this trade during the Imperial reign. This study proposes to study the intricate use of history in the selected narratives by Ghosh, and hybridity, both in content and use of language. Most of his works are set against the backdrop of historic events. Ghosh, in a manner unlike other writers, has a penchant of focusing not on the event of history itself; rather he pays heed to the individuals sketched in the niches of these incidents. That is to say, that he brings the marginal to the fore; he lends a voice to the people who more often than not are overlooked and lost in the forgotten valley of history. It will explore how Ghosh has enmeshed fact and fiction in his creations and how it has led to a subaltern, hybrid and doctored race of humans, languages and cultures irrespective of their

nations of origin. Ghosh enmeshes fiction and history to create a new world as portrayed in the trilogy. This convergence creates an intriguing vista for research.

This study, therefore, hypothesizes that Ghosh lends a voice to the subaltern and marginalized characters. For there were many subjugated people in the British Raj. As they were suppressed not only by the British but at the hands of fellow Indians as well in the name of caste, class and gender. Through the method of compare and contrast, the selected works of Ghosh will be intensively studied to trace the Subaltern theory and the motifs used to employ this aspect of Postcolonialism.

Objectives: -

This research attempts to analyze Ghosh's depiction of caste and social structure in his plots. It endeavours to trace the depiction and portrayal of ethnicity in the Ibis trilogy. This study proposes to study the portrayal of the marginalized sections of the society. This research also aims to trace how Ghosh uses characters from different sections of the society, particularly the weaker in the selected chronicles. It attempts to study the social concern raised by Ghosh in the selected trilogy. This study purports to examine the role of women characters in the trilogy. It attempts to analyze Ghosh's use of 'lascari' – the hybrid form of language that he uses which is an amalgamation of English, Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Bengali, and Chinese. It also attempts to explore how Ghosh raises the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Methodology: -

The methodology entailing this research would include an exploration of the texts through close reading, interpreting and comparing/contrasting primary sources by Amitav Ghosh with the help of Gayatri Spivak's theory of Subalternity. Biographical, literary and historical material will also be used, including books on cultural studies with reference to the timeline of the plot and the historic circumstances surrounding it, as it will provide an insight into the potential issues of the research. The findings will be supported with significant

critical essays and articles on the theme of subalternitiy, history and hybridity, and sub – fields entailing these themes, by correlating narrative history with historic events. The approach will be interdisciplinary, focussing on socio – political and historical subjects in relation to the Opium Wars and the effects of both its production and consumption on the lives of people associated with the process.

Plan of Work: -

1. **Introduction: Subalternity in Postcolonial context**

The introductory chapter will focus on the contemporary scenario of Indian Literature in English; it will include a brief glimpse on the predecessors of the author of Ibis trilogy. This research will be examining the primary texts for the intricate use of subalternity by Ghosh through a Postcolonial lens.

2. **Caste and Social Structure**

The second chapter will analyze caste and social structure as depicted in the trilogy by Ghosh. Since its enslavement by the British, India has been witnessing quite a few changes in its society, economy, and social structure as a result of the interaction between two nations, societies, cultures and races. Nineteenth century, too, was no exception to this norm. The Ibis trilogy portrays a world replete of the same. Caste and social structure have been a part of the multicoloured picture presented by Ghosh where not only the different castes but various social classes culminate in the creation of British India colonial times.

3. **Ethnicity**

This chapter discusses ethnicity as witnessed in Ibis trilogy by Ghosh. The trilogy is an amalgamation of the social structure, caste and ethnicity witnessed in the world portrayed by Ghosh. This world depicted consisted of characters belonging to various castes, walks of life, and ethnicities. The relations forged were seen on land and sea (i.e. aboard the *Ibis* and in India and China.)

4. Role of Marginalized Women in Ibis Trilogy

The fourth chapter is an attempt at analysing the journey of the subaltern and marginalized women characters of varied castes, faiths and nations of origin interwoven in the trilogy. The journey which had begun aboard the *Ibis*, the relationships forged amidst the raging storms finally come to rest in the third section of the trilogy by Ghosh where all the characters reach their respective destinations. Despite the short amount of time these ship siblings had spent together, their bonds were strengthened with the hardships that had befallen them.

5. A Stylistic Analysis of 'Lascari' Language

The fifth chapter discusses and examines the style of writing employed by Ghosh in penning the Ibis trilogy. It will seek the art of syntax and semantic used by the author in the selected novels. The chapter will also focus on 'lascari' – the hybrid form of language that Ghosh uses which is an amalgamation of English, Bhojpuri, Gujarati, Bengali, and Chinese; in order to represent a colony consisting of people belonging to various zones, sections, and nations of the world working under the colonial rule of the British Empire as was evident in the nineteenth century India and other British colonies across the globe.

6. Conclusion

The concluding chapter will seek to evaluate the marginalized section of the society, history and the economic aspect of the times enlisted in the creation and formation of the Ibis trilogy and the world re – presented in the narrative.

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